

**INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC: A LIVE ISSUE**  
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*This paper is an expansion of a lesson taught in London in 1984. At that time my conclusion was that Instrumental Music, though not a truly doctrinal issue as such, was best kept out of the church. My thinking has developed during the past decade, though the basic premise of the paper has not. I hope this contribution will be helpful in our current musical discussion.*

Who would have thought instrumental music was a damnable sin? Not me! I remember well my first retreat, in October 1977. At a class on the Restoration Movement a well-meaning man offered the following analogy:

Suppose you paid a man to come and pave your driveway. How would you feel if he paved your garden too? You wouldn't be too happy, would you? No. Why not? Because you hadn't *authorized* him to pave your garden. He had no *authority* to do it. We need authority for every practice we follow, and instrumental music has no authority in the New Testament.

So the argument went. The ultimate conclusion: any teaching or practice not specifically "authorized" by the New Testament was damnable. Only the Church of Christ teaches the truth on instrumental music, hence it's the true church.

(Fortunately repentance and baptism were also taught and, despite the doctrinally questionable teaching on Instrumental Music [IM], the next day I was baptized.)

Today, 16 years later, we are re-evaluating this issue in our movement, the International Churches of Christ. Is IM really a doctrinal issue? Is it prohibited, commanded, or is it only tolerated? Do the scriptures speak clearly on this subject, or is it one of those "gray areas"?

These are the questions this paper addresses itself to. The outline is simple, the paper brief:

- I. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**
- II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**
- III. SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION**
- IV. LINGUISTIC ILLUMINATION**
- V. CONCLUSION**

Of course it should be understood that the discussion concerns IM *in the assembly*, since for years we've had IM at concerts and other special events. And now, let's begin!

## I. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

What's the thinking behind a theology that forbids music, missionary societies and kitchens in the church building? Much has been said lately about the pithy proverb: *Speak where the Bible speaks, be silent where the Bible is silent.* Properly understood and applied, this gives us great freedom. Yet in the Restoration Movement, especially over the course of the 19th century, the saying was inverted and instead of being led into glorious freedom the movement was led astray into increasingly inglorious legalism. Our lawyers were very good, every bit as clever as the expounders of the Mishnah!

### Nadab & Abihu, Inc.

A classic prooftext was Leviticus 10:1-2:

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

Nadab and Abihu were struck dead for their irreverent Act -- offering *unauthorized fire* to the Lord. Imagine the gall, to improvise like that! Never mind that a specific command had been broken (Exodus 30.9), which means that disobedience and not improvisation was the real cause of God's anger.

### Patternism

Patternism is the conviction that there's a pattern for everything, and that, just as Moses was to follow the pattern shown him on the mountain (Exodus 25.40), so we under the new covenant must discover and adhere strictly to the pattern: the pattern for worship, leadership, and everything else.

Of course patternism includes two questionable assumptions: (1) that a "pattern" exists, and (2) that we have found *correct* pattern. One is *never* allowed the luxury of being wrong, since to deviate from the pattern is to be lost, and salvation is dependent on the pattern. Sadly, from 1860 on, it was generally assumed in the Restoration Movement that the "New Testament Church" had been restored.

And since the N.T. "pattern" didn't mention IM, it must be forbidden! Such is the theory, at any rate. Given such an approach to scripture (and to God) it isn't surprising that IM became such a focal point for controversy.

## II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Next let's trace the development of attitudes towards IM through the centuries. As you'll see from the following table, IM is quite rare in earliest and latest times, though in the broad, fuzzy middle period it played a major role in worship.

### HISTORICAL DATES IN RELATION TO INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

YEAR (AD)	EVENT OR ISSUE
<p><b>30-100</b> Apparent unity of practice throughout the 1st century. In 2nd century, it was often illegal to practice the faith, and easy to see why worship would avoid noisy instruments.</p>	<p><b>No instrumental music.</b> Church follows Jewish <i>synagogue practice</i>, against that of Mystery Religions, which nearly always used instruments to accompany their idolatrous and sensual religious rites.</p>
<p><b>381</b> (Eighty years earlier Christianity had become legal Empire-wide.)</p>	<p><b>Christianity becomes official</b> religion of the Roman Empire. Jewish and pagan elements infiltrate church at alarming rate.</p>
<b>400 ?</b>	<p><b>Introduction of music</b> more common. Also at this time Great Apostasy sees intensification of moral &amp; spiritual demise of the faith.</p>
<b>900</b>	<p><b>Organs first used.</b></p>
<p><b>1054</b> Churches split East and West. Argument over true leader of church.</p>	<p><b>Catholic-Orthodox split</b> is now irreparable. Corruption of traditional church soon to reach its worst depths.</p>
<b>1517</b>	<p><b>Protestant Reformation</b> begins with Martin Luther in Germany. Many reformers stood opposed to IM. For instance, the Anabaptists favored <i>a cappella</i> singing (1524). Calvin also stood opposed.</p>
<p><b>1690</b> Restoration Movement starts within Scotch Baptist Churches, moves down into England and across to America (early 1800s).</p>	<p><b>First "Church of Christ"</b> in Scotland: Eldership, adult baptism, name "Church of Christ", weekly Communion, <i>a cappella</i> singing. Calvinistic &amp; non-evangelistic.</p>
<p><b>1859</b> In favor of organ: "The singing [<i>a cappella</i>] was so deplorable it scared the rats away!"</p>	<p><b>"Instrument" introduced</b> at Midway, KY. Interestingly, the most ardent advocates insisted that IM <i>wasn't</i> a term of fellowship.</p>
<p><b>1866</b> NB: His influence dominated American movement through most of 19th century.</p>	<p><b>Death of Alexander Campbell.</b> Before this, controversies tended to be rather low-key. After this, things heat up considerably!</p>
<b>1868</b>	<p><b>Britons</b> (tended to be more conservative) <b>criticize Americans</b> over use of instrument.</p>
<p><b>1889</b> This is my position after poring over contemporary issues of <i>British Millennial Harbinger</i> at British Museum in London.</p>	<p><b>Churches of Christ first differentiated from Christian Church.</b> Present exclusive view of baptism. Before this, baptisms even in the Baptist Church considered valid.</p>
<p><b>1890s</b> COC truly an issues-oriented group.</p>	<p><b>Discord</b> over instrument, lawsuits, ending 4 decades of disagreement without division.</p>
<p><b>1906</b> IM not major issue; there are many others!</p>	<p><b>US Census:</b> Churches of Christ a separate denomination. Most are anti-instrumental.</p>

Thus we see that historically our movement has avoided the use of IM. This in itself, however, is no argument against IM. The issue, if truly a doctrinal one, must be informed by the Bible. And so on to section III.

### III. SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

We've already seen how Lev 10 has been misused to uphold a patternistic approach to interpretation. Yet there are many more passages whose examination will prove helpful to our inquiry. Consider how strong the case against IM is after perusing these scriptures.

#### Numbers 20

Moses, having been told to speak to the rock, actually *struck* the rock with his staff. Was Moses bound to *perfect* obedience before blessing (water) came? Even though Moses, in the heat of emotion, technically disobeyed God by striking the rock, the blessing came anyway! Patternists would have him keep going back (his spiritual attitude is of little account) until he "got it right." Another passage which shows God's grace and flexibility is **2 Chron 30.20**. Ritual law is never as important as moral law.

#### 2 Chron 29.25

Often it's said that in the O.T. IM was allowed, but never commanded. This could hardly be farther from the truth! In this passage we see that instrumental music wasn't just David's idea; it was *commanded* by God!

He stationed the Levites in the temple of the Lord with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet; this was *commanded* by the Lord through his prophets.

The passage speaks for itself. True, the command isn't repeated in the NT, but that doesn't necessarily invalidate it. (It didn't make the hit list in Col 2.15-16.) Nor can one reason the other way: bestiality is forbidden in the OT (Lev 18), but the absence of a prohibition in the NT in no way means it's allowed!

The question may be asked, "Is it commanded today?" For reasons to be set forth in a moment, we may answer a solid "no" -- but that in no way means it is prohibited! How can you prove that this is an issue or test of fellowship?

#### The Psalms

Singing is enjoined upon the saints in the O.T.: Psalms 42.8, 47.7, 77.6, 101.1. But so is IM! See Psalms 49.4, 57.7-8 (108.1-2), 71.22, 92.2-3, and 150.3-5. One could sum up with a verse in the Psalter which flatly says that instrumental music is "good":

It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night, to the music of the ten-stringed lyre and the melody of the harp.

If it's "good", then we really should have no problem with it! Then there are the musical directions at the heads of many psalms.

A catalogue may be tedious, but something can definitely be learned! We see different classes of instruction.

1. Stringed instruments: 4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67, 76.

2. "For the Director of Music": 8-14, 18-22, 31, 36, 39-47, 49, 51-53, 56-59, 62, 64-66, 68-70, 75, 77, 80-81, 84-85, 88, 109, 139-140.
3. "Psalm" (a musical term itself): 2-6, 8-10, 12-13, 15, 19-24, 29-31, 38-41, 47-51, 62-68, 73, 75-77, 79-80, 82-85, 87-88, 92, 98, 100-101, 108-110, 139-141, 143.
4. Flutes: 5.

In light of the huge number of verses giving commands and instruction for IM in Psalms alone, it's hard to see how anyone could say God only "tolerated" it in O.T. times -- as he "tolerated" writs of divorce (Deuteronomy 24).

### **Amos 6.5**

A scathing denouncement of complacent worshipers, often taken as a rebuke for using IM, is found in Amos 6:

You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments.

But in context Amos isn't criticizing them for using IM, but rather for being nonchalant towards the cause of righteousness. (A N.T. parallel may be found in Rev 18.22.)

### **Ephesians 5.19**

The N.T. contains no specific commands to use IM as such, though perhaps this verse comes closest to "authorizing" it:

Speak to one another ~~with~~ ~~psalms~~ ~~and~~ spiritual songs. Sing ~~and~~ make heart to God.

The word translated "make music" is the same root word translated "psalms" in the previous sentence. This makes it extremely difficult to interpret *psalms* in a strictly instrumental way. (If that were the case, strictly speaking we would have to keep the [instrumental] music in our hearts.)

In fact "psalm" has several possible meanings:

- i. sacred song *accompanied* by a stringed instrument (*not* the usual meaning)
- ii. the *words* of the sacred song, without reference to accompaniment
- iii. the words of the song as a piece of *scripture*, again without musical reference: the normal meaning we encounter in the N.T.
- iv. possibly, the *tune* to which such a song is sung or played

Which meaning is in mind must be understood from the context, and since "speech" is what Paul has in mind in Eph 5.19 it would appear he's using the term in a neutral or even non-instrumental way.

This brings us to a more serious consideration of the linguistic background of the ancient word we translate as "psalm".

## **IV. Linguistic Illumination**

Here are some of the basic Hebrew and Greek words in the "psalm" family:

Heb: **Zimrah** = music piece or psalm to be accompanied by an ~~instrument~~ <sup>ensemble</sup>; psalm.

**Mizmor** = instrumental music; by implication, a poem set to notes.  
O.T. psalms are clearly set to music.

Gk: **Psallo** = pluck; sing (ψαλλω).

**Psalmos** = twang; tune, song (ψαλμωδία). My position is that ψαλμωδία in the NT did *not* mean anything necessarily instrumental.

### Classical Greek

The non-specialist may tend to lump all Greek together, but in fact the Greek language is much older than the classical Greek we may have heard of. *Attic* Greek, the dialect of Athenians at the high point of their culture (400s and 300s BC) became the standard for Classical Greek, but by N.T. times the language had changed significantly. Modern Greek is entirely different again!

To lump them all together is oversimplistic! You might as well assume an English word in the 900s (Old English) kept its meaning in the 1300s (Middle English) and even in the 1600s (Modern English)! The King James translation, which is difficult for nearly all English speakers to grasp well, is only a specimen of *Modern* English -- *not* Old English! For instance, in the KJV "conversation" means not speech or dialogue, but *conduct*. And most readers of this paper are wholly unable to understand Old or Middle English (me included)!

In ancient Greek ψαλλω meant "*to touch, stir, or move by touching; to pull, pluck; to pull and let go again, twang with the fingers.*" In the absolute it meant "*to play*" and later "*to sing to a harp.*" The instrumental connotation is unmistakable! [Source: Liddell & Scott, Greek-English Lexicon]

### Septuagint Greek

In the 3rd century BC the Hebrew O.T. was translated into Greek for the benefit of Jews no longer familiar or comfortable with the mother tongue. It's interesting to see how certain words were rendered into this translation Greek.

#### Excursus

For example, the Heb. *rosh* means "head." In Septuagintal Gk. this word is most often translated κεφαλή (kephale). When we hear the word "head" we think of the body part first, then the meaning of head as "ruler." But when *rosh* means head in the sense of "ruler", it's regularly rendered ἀρχόν (archon). When *rosh* is translated κεφαλή, in nearly every case it means head in the sense of "source" (as in the "head" of a river), and *not* head in the sense of "ruler". This throws light on 1 Cor 11, where man is the "head" (κεφαλή, not ἀρχόν) of woman. How many of us knew that? How could you unless you were a student of Gk.? Words change meaning! Exactly the point in connection with ψαλλω.

In translation Greek ψαλλω usually does *not* mean to play, but rather to sing. This is a few centuries before Paul wrote Ephesians. [Source: Walter Bauer, Greek-English Lexicon of the N.T. and other Early Christian Literature]

### New Testament (Koine) Greek

In the Greek N.T. the only documents even approaching Classical Greek are Hebrews, Luke and Acts. Hebrews is the finest specimen. Next, Luke's two works have the finest Greek. The early portion of Luke is deliberately written in a Septuagintal style, probably to give the lead-up to the ministry of Jesus an old-time feel. But on the whole N.T. Greek had changed considerably since classical times.

One instance is the word  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma$ . In N.T. Greek it means to "sing" or "sing praise." There is in my opinion a remote chance that it means to sing to stringed accompaniment, but I wouldn't put any money on it!

### **Modern Greek**

In the modern Greek language  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma$  means to "sing" *exclusively*. It has nothing whatsoever to do with instrumental accompaniment.

### **Summary**

It would seem that there's no justification (from Eph 5) for the position that the N.T. commands IM. The most we can say is that there is a dearth of evidence. And since it isn't *disallowed*, it is safe to teach that it's *allowed*.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

While IM was definitely commanded in O.T. worship, it isn't commanded in the N.T. The early church closely followed synagogue practice (as against large-scale, instrumental Temple Worship), which was small-scale and non-instrumental. Centuries of reluctance to assimilate Christianity to pagan religions (first) plus patternistic exegesis in reaction against denominational error (later) led to its rejection even though there were no scriptural grounds for such a position. Specious linguistic arguments have been enlisted on both sides of the controversy. IM requires no N.T. authorization; its implementation is a practical question, not primarily a biblical one.

In short, here are the conclusions of this paper:

- i. Instrumental Music is neither commanded nor prohibited by the NT.
- ii. There's no convincing proof that we stand under the OT command to have IM.
- iii. This is thus an area of Christian liberty.
- iv. So, to the extent that IM expedites the gospel, we should be willing to use it.